

Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Soviet Policy In Lebanon and Syria: What Next?

SUMMARY

Moscow almost certainly regards the recent US setbacks and Syrian successes in Lebanon as vindication of its policy since the summer of 1982 of firm support for President Assad's strategy. The "victory" of Syria—and, by association, the USSR—is not clear-cut, however, with the continuing presence of Israeli forces in southern Lebanon. The Soviets are likely to remain on the sidelines in Lebanon in deference to Damascus, but they will attempt to parlay their success there into expanded influence in the Middle East. Nevertheless, Syria's isolation and apparent unwillingness to reconcile differences with the other Arabs remain major stumbling-blocks to Moscow's effort to rebuild a credible Arab "rejectionist front" opposed to US peace efforts. [redacted]

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1. The USSR's two primary objectives since the deployment of the MNF to Beirut in September 1982 have been the removal of US forces and the prevention of a US-sponsored Lebanese peace settlement. From the Soviet viewpoint, the US decision to redeploy the Marines has diminished the prospect of a permanent US military presence in Lebanon and the risk—which has existed since the USSR deployed its own air defense forces to Syria in January 1983—of a direct Soviet-American military confrontation in the region. [redacted]

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2. Moscow's Syrian and Lebanese allies appear to have triumphed over the US-backed Gemayel government. Although the Soviets played no direct role in these events, the arms they supplied to Syria and, through the Syrians, to the Druze and Shia militias helped make those victories possible. [redacted]

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This memorandum prepared by [redacted] SOVA, Current Support Division, China Third World Branch. It has been coordinated with the Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, the National Intelligence Council and the Directorate of Operations. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, China/Third World Branch, CSD/SOVA [redacted]

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3. The Kremlin leaders' satisfaction is nevertheless likely to be guarded. The unity the Syrians, Druze, and Shias have shown in opposing the Gemayel Government is almost certain to unravel in the course of reestablishing authority in Beirut. Differing Soviet-Syrian views on Lebanon are also likely to reemerge. Moscow, after all, criticized Syria's initial intervention in Lebanon in 1976 because it was directed against the Lebanese leftists and the PLO and was supported by the US. It was only after Syria's occupation changed from supporting Lebanon's Christians to opposing them that the USSR came around to endorsing--albeit not enthusiastically--Damascus' presence. After Israel's invasion in 1982, the Soviets put aside their reservations about the Syrian occupation and came to accept Syria's arguments that it had legitimate security interests in Lebanon. In part, this was to ease strains in Soviet-Syrian relations stemming from Syria's belief that the Soviets did not do enough to help it during the Israeli invasion. With the removal of those strains, US forces out and Syrian predominance growing, Moscow is likely to see less need to identify itself closely with Syrian policy in Lebanon.

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4. A sobering factor for both the Soviets and their Syrian and Lebanese allies is the continuing Israeli occupation of the southern third of Lebanon. Syrian troops are unlikely to be withdrawn as long as the Israelis remain, posing a continuing risk of a Syrian-Israeli clash. Although the Israelis have stated publicly that they are not prepared to intervene in order to save the Gemayel regime, they have demonstrated that they will move to prevent PLO forces from reestablishing themselves in the Beirut area and south.

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What Next for Lebanon...

5. The likelihood of strains notwithstanding, the US setbacks and Syria's successes argue against any major changes in Soviet policy toward Lebanon. Whatever the success of their policy, the Soviets have at best been supporting actors in the Lebanese drama, mainly because of Syria's jealous guarding of its position in Lebanon. Soviet arms, for instance, make their way to the Lebanese factions--and until recently, to PLO forces in Lebanon--through a Syrian tap, which Damascus opens and closes to suit its own interests. Soviet-Syrian differences in Lebanon may resurface, but Moscow's lack of influence there is likely to leave it little choice but to continue deferring to Damascus.

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6. The Syrians appear determined to maintain pressure on Gemayel--without destroying his government completely--in order to achieve a favorable settlement in Beirut. This goal and the fact that the MNF is on its way out are the main reasons why the Syrians and Soviets opposed France's proposal to replace the MNF with a UN force. The Soviets are probably advising the Syrians not to push too

hard in Lebanon, especially during the next few weeks, in order not to provoke Israel. An Israeli countermove could wipe out the gains Moscow's allies have made and, more importantly, lead to a Syrian-Israeli confrontation that would again put the Soviets in the uncomfortable position of either coming to Syria's aid militarily or opening itself to charges of being an unreliable ally. The Kremlin probably would also be worried that too bold a grab for power by Syria and its allies could prompt the US to reverse its pullout. []

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7. Moscow is likely to increase its contacts with the various Lebanese factions in order to keep abreast of and, if possible, influence domestic developments in Lebanon. Karen Brutents, the Central Committee International Department's top Middle Eastern specialist, was to travel to Lebanon just before Andropov's death in mid-February and can be expected to re-schedule his trip. He and his chief, Boris Ponomarev, have consulted in Moscow during the last two months with Druze leader Junblatt and Lebanese Communist Party General Secretary Hawi. In addition, during the past three months Soviet Ambassador Soldatov has met with Shia religious leaders and, reportedly, with Shia Amal leader Barri and the head of the leftist Murabitun militia. []

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...And Beyond

8. The apparent victory of Syria in Lebanon boosts Soviet credibility among the Arabs. Moscow's reputation had been severely damaged by its inability to prevent the Syrian and PLO defeats at the hands of the Israelis in 1982. Even those Arabs who oppose Syrian hegemony in Lebanon are likely to be impressed with the USSR's solid military support for Damascus, in particular its deployment of Soviet SA-5 surface-to-air missile units to Syria. []

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9. Nevertheless, Moscow's only significant ally remains Syria. Although Damascus has shown its ability to dominate Lebanon, intimidate other Arab governments and absorb the blows of Israel, it remains isolated among the Arabs. Only Libya and South Yemen support it, and neither count for much in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The rift inside the PLO and the feud between Arafat and Assad make Arab unity as unlikely as ever. Moreover, such Arab unity as may be developing in the embryonic alignment of Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Arafat's faction of the PLO probably would be viewed by Moscow as counterproductive, since it would further isolate Syria and possibly lead to greater cooperation with the US. In sum, the elusive Arab unity the Soviets have been calling for over the years is no closer to being achieved. []

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10. Over the next few months, Soviet policy will probably concentrate on preventing the creation of an anti-Damascus axis among the Arabs and reviving the "rejectionist front," which once included Syria, Libya, South Yemen, Algeria, Iraq, and the PLO. But, as has long been the case, Soviet efforts to reconcile Syria with the rest of the Arabs depend on President Assad, who seems as determined as ever to chart his own course. []

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